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Written statement* submitted by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[25 May 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Please recycle

Freedom of Expression and Belief in Bangladesh: A campaign of killings against atheist bloggers

"Militant groups are trying to justify these murders using religious textures and manipulating young minds to commit this type of heinous acts [sic] So it's our responsibility to write and share our thoughts against these things. It's time to actively speak out and encourage our people in rational thinking. Stop writing for fear of death, that is not going to happen here."

– *Eukli, atheist blogger in Bangladesh*[1]

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is seriously concerned about the situation for people in Bangladesh who seek to express their criticism of political Islam, Islamism, or religious militancy, who advocate secularism, or who identify as atheist.

During the first five months of 2015, three atheist bloggers were hacked to death on the streets of Bangladesh.

On the 26th February, after receiving threats from Islamists, a prominent American blogger of Bangladeshi origin, and founder of the Mukto-Mona (Free-mind) blog site, Avijit Roy, was murdered with machetes in Dhaka. The attack also left his wife, Rafida Ahmed, critically wounded. A month later, on the 30th March, another blogger, Washiqur Rahman, was killed on a street in Dhaka by Islamists using meat cleavers. The suspects said they killed Rahman due to his anti-Islamic articles. On the 12th May, blogger Ananta Bijoy Das was hacked to death on a crowded street in the city of Sylhet. He was on his way to work when he was chased down the road and killed by four masked attackers wielding machetes.

According to civil society there exists a 'hit-list' compiled by radical Islamists, which includes many secularist writers, bloggers and journalists – the three bloggers killed this year were reportedly named on that list. As yet, no one has been successfully prosecuted over the attacks.[2] The IHEU is in touch with over a dozen atheist writers / bloggers who are living in fear for their life.

The three murders this year follow a succession of attacks over many years against those who identify as non-religious or who criticise Islamism in Bangladesh: In November 2014, Islamic militants hacked to death a humanist university professor, Shafiul Islam, several years after he led a push to ban students wearing full-face veils for identification purposes; in February 2013, atheist blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider had his head hacked open with a machete the day after he took part in the Shahbag rally;[3] a month previous, Islamist militants attempted to murder another atheist blogger, Asif Mohiuddin, by stabbing him in the neck; and in August 2004, assailants attacked the Bangladeshi writer Humayun Azad with machetes after he tried to expose the politics and ideology of Islamic fundamentalists in the country.

This pattern of vicious attacks shows how Bangladesh's secular / atheist blogging community is being specifically targeted in a violent killing campaign, which, notably the state authorities seem either unable or unwilling to prevent.[4] The head of an activist blogger network and a leader in the 2013 Shahbag protests, Imran H. Sarker has

[1] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/bangladesh/11616459/Our-country-could-become-like-Afghanistan-Bangladeshs-bloggers-are-living-in-fear.html

[2] https://www.amnesty.org/en/articles/news/2015/05/bangladesh-authorities-must-deliver-justice-as-third-blogger-is-hacked-to-death/

[3] http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2013/02/16/killers-hacked-rajib-first-then-slit-his-throat-police

[4] https://www.amnesty.org/en/articles/news/2015/05/bangladesh-authorities-must-deliver-justice-as-third-blogger-is-hacked-to-death/

observed that, "open-minded and progressive bloggers are being targeted in general. They are killing those who are easy to access, when they get the opportunity [...] The main attempt is to create fear among bloggers."[5]

Not only does this violence successfully silence those who have been murdered, but it also works to create a public space in which free speech is inhibited; it "sends a chilling message to all in Bangladesh who espouse independent views on religious issues."[6]

Given Bangladesh is an avowedly secular country and the Awami League government sees itself as supporting secularism, it might be expected that the government would respond to this violence by sending out a clear message in support of the right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief – particularly given such rights represent values enshrined in the constitution. This has not been the case.

In April 2013, in response to calls from Islamic groups for the introduction of a law providing for capital punishment of those who "malign Allah, Islam and Prophet Muhammad," the police arrested four bloggers (including Asif Mohiuddin) for "causing hurt to religious belief."[7] At the same time, an estimated 100,000 Islamists took to the streets of Dhaka calling for "death to the atheist bloggers."

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said her government would take action against anyone defaming Islam.[8] She rejected the calls from Islamists to implement an anti-blasphemy law, arguing that existing laws *were already sufficient to punish anyone who attempted to insult religion*. Under the existing cyber laws in Bangladesh, a person can be jailed for up to 10 years if convicted of defaming a religion online. Hasina added, "If anybody tried to harm any sentiments of any religion or any religious leader, there is a law, we can take any action."[9]

Sajeeb Wazed, a key figure in the Awami League and son of Hasina, justified the government's failure to provide public condolences to the families of the murdered bloggers, by stating: "We are walking a fine line here. We don't want to be seen as atheists [...] It doesn't change our core beliefs. We believe in secularism. But given that our opposition party plays that religion card against us relentlessly, we can't come out strongly for [Mr Roy]. It's about perception, not about reality."[10]

The government's keenness to dissociate itself from its atheist citizens is not only callous and morally reprehensible in its treatment of them as citizens and human beings, but it fails to recognise that the murders of atheist /secular bloggers is also an attack on the freedom of expression and freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief of *all*. The failure by the authorities to take all possible steps to ensure the perpetrators of these crimes are brought to justice, and to ensure protection for those at risk, can only be interpreted as sending the message that such attacks are tolerated by the authorities - creating a climate of permissive impunity which facilitates violence against anyone who seek to question the status quo.

Such a climate should be viewed against a backdrop of "official harassment of journalists in Bangladesh."[11] Article 19 has described an "alarming increase in harassment through unwarranted application of laws" and cases of intimidation and threat on the increase by 26.66%.[12] Bangladeshi news outlets are reported to have dozens of cases filed against staff; which range in allegations from defamation to contempt of court. The editor of one paper, *Prothom Alo*, said he believed the cases were efforts by authorities to intimidate his paper.[13] Earlier this year, a court initiated contempt of

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[5] http://www.dw.de/bangladeshi-bloggers-pay-the-price-of-upholding-secularism/a-18349725

[6] http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/05/12/bangladesh-killing-blogger-blow-free-speech

[7] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/bangladesh/11616459/Our-country-could-become-like-Afghanistan-Bangladeshs-bloggers-are-living-in-fear.html

[8] http://www.dw.de/tension-flares-over-blasphemy-and-free-speech/a-16728459

[9] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22058462

[10] http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/32703432/not-believing-in-god-is-dangerous-for-bloggers-in-bangladesh

[11] https://cpj.org/2015/04/cpj-concerned-by-arrest-of-bangladeshi-journalist-.php

[12] "Freedom of Expression in Bangladesh 2014," Article 19, p2.
http://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/37943/Bangladesh-FoE-Country-Report-2014.pdf

[13] https://cpj.org/2015/04/cpj-concerned-by-arrest-of-bangladeshi-journalist-.php

court charges against twenty-three people who had signed a letter expressing concern about the use of the contempt of court law to curb freedom of expression in the country.[14]

All of this contributes to a public space in which minorities, whether critical of religion, Islamism, or the Government, are muted by fear of reactive extreme violence; a space full of danger and intimidation for those who seek to exercise their fundamental human rights to freedom of religion, belief and expression as protected by international law. By enabling this climate, Bangladesh is acting in contravention of its international obligations on human rights and betraying those who are courageous enough to speak out against religious extremism and militancy in the country.

Accordingly, we call on the Human Rights Council to put pressure on Bangladesh, as a member of the Council, to:

- Act urgently to bring to justice those responsible for the brutal attacks, and to make clear that attacking freedom of religion and expression will not be tolerated.
- Do all in its power to stop the violent campaign against those who profess no religion, criticise Islamism, political Islam, or religious views.
- Make a clear and public statement clarifying that the right to freedom of religion or belief applies to those with no religious belief as well; the importance of the country's leader recognising atheists as moral agents in possession of the same rights as religious citizens should not be underestimated.
- Amend the Information Communications Technology Act 2006, specifically section 57, so as to bring it in to line with international standards.
- Ensure that law enforcement agencies uphold the right to freedom of expression, and provide training to those agencies on how to deal with crimes against those seeking to exercise free expression.

As an elected member of the Council, Bangladesh is obliged to "uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights" and "fully cooperate with the Council."[15] If it is to retain any credibility as a member, we urge it to reform its laws so as to protect freedom of religion, belief, and expression, and take urgent action to protect the lives of those citizens who simply wish to exercise such rights.

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[14] http //www dhakatribune com/bangladesh/2015/apr/02/23-citizens-issued-contempt-notice

[15] A/RES/60/251, §9